Correspondence

Rattlesnake Meat Ingestion—A Common Hispanic Folk Remedy

To THE EDITOR: A recent article on rattlesnake capsule-associated *Salmonella arizona* infections in Los Angeles emphasized the importance of being aware of the potentially dangerous Mexican folk remedy of ingesting rattlesnake meat.[1] The authors suggested that the use of rattlesnake capsules by the Hispanic population in areas of the United States with large Mexican-American populations is probably widespread. We recently conducted a survey to determine the extent of use and knowledge of the folk remedy of rattlesnake meat ingestion and the reasons given for its use. Patients were interviewed from R.E. Thomason General Hospital, the county hospital serving the indigent population of El Paso, Texas, situated on the US-Mexican border across the river from Ciudad Juarez.

A standardized, orally administered, open-ended questionnaire in English or Spanish was given to 200 consecutive outpatients seen in the medicine clinic. Patients were asked if they knew of the folk remedy of ingesting rattlesnake meat, powder, or capsule; if so, the reason(s) people use it; and if they or a close family member had ever used this remedy. Statistical analysis for differences between proportions was done by the χ^2 test with 2×2 contingency tables.

All 200 patients interviewed responded. There were 132 men and 68 women, ages 17 to 83 years (mean 52.8). Of these, 177 (88.5%) were Hispanic. A total of 156 of the 200 patients (78%) had heard about the folk remedy of ingesting rattlesnake meat to treat illnesses. These represented 82% (146/177) of Hispanic patients and 43% (10/23) of non-Hispanic patients ($P < .001$). Of the 200 patients, 67 (33.5%) said that either they or their relatives had used rattlesnake remedies to treat illnesses. Of these, 37% (66/177) were Hispanic and only 4.3% (1/23) were not ($P < .005$). The illnesses cited most frequently for which rattlesnake meat ingestion was helpful were skin conditions, 53 patients (34%); arthritis, 30 (19%); stomach problems, 22 (14%); blood diseases, 21 (13%); cancer, 19 (12%); infections, 18 (12%); diabetes mellitus, 18 (12%); hypertension, 7 (4%); "nervous conditions," 5 (3%); allergies, 4 (3%); and miscellaneous illnesses, 20 (13%). Additionally, 4 patients thought it would improve their strength, and 2 took it because it tasted good.

Results of our survey in El Paso are consistent with the conclusion that the folk remedy of ingesting rattlesnake meat is well known among the Mexican-American population and that it is commonly used in some areas for a variety of indications. Physicians should be aware of their patients' cultural beliefs and possible use of folk remedies, either instead of or in addition to standard medical treatments.[2,3] In view of the risk of serious salmonella infections, we concur with the authors' suggestion that education is needed regarding the potentially harmful consequences of this particular folk remedy.

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Acknowledgements

To THE EDITOR: I would like to acknowledge two important contributors to my article, "Arsenic Poisoning," which appeared in the September issue of the journal.[1]

This was a clinical conference, and the pathologic material I presented was graciously provided by Karen Blisard, MD, and Patrick Lantz, MD. Dr Blisard, a neuropathologist at the Albuquerque Veterans Administration Medical Center, supplied the osmium stained sections of nerve tissue shown in Figure 7. Dr Lantz, a pathologist at the Albuquerque Office of Medical Investigation, supplied the autopsy material presented in Figures 4 and 5. Both of these investigators have scholarly works in press on the pathologic effects of arsenic, and I am grateful for the early use of their material in my article.

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Yellowstone as Metaphor

To THE EDITOR: There is an almost spiritual similarity between our public grieving over the fire damage in Yellowstone Park and our almost obsessive desire to preserve human life for as long as possible.

Naturalists and ecologists seem to agree that our national emotional reaction to the fire devastation in Yellowstone Park is out of proportion to the actual damage to the ecosystem. It has been pointed out by some less frenetic scientists and journalists that the true treasures of that park are its hydrothermal pools, its geysers and animals, and its emotional meaning to us as the first and "grandest" of our national parks. It was, after all, conceived and founded by a popular president—good old Teddy Roosevelt—and ranks in national pride somewhere between Old Ironsides and the flag over Fort Sumter . . . and yet someone deliberately decided to let half of it burn up. There is a nagging suspicion that some of the grief and sensation over the burn may have been inspired by economic concerns—it was, after all, a very visual television story during the news doldrums between the end of the Gulf war and Hurricane Gilbert.

One senses an eerie similarity in our perception of loss of the park and our inability to come to grips with the finality of the human life cycle—our collective need to preserve life, almost any life, indefinitely and almost without any regard for the quality of that life. For us, as physicians whose lives are dedicated to staving off that finality as long as possible, empathy is understandable because to us death is defeat. People are born programmed to die, but our national psyche seems to have lost touch with its own inevitable mortality.

Perhaps just as it was impossible for the National Park